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SUBJECT: Special Media Reaction: Former Presidents
Clinton and Bush Visit Sri Lanka

1. (U) Summary: The visit of former Presidents Clinton and Bush to Sri Lanka February 20-21 elicited copious, straightforward media coverage, with all media outlets, print as well as electronic, featuring the visit prominently. Editorial comment was largely positive as well, but a few outlets criticized the former Presidents for not visiting the north and east. TV news programs ran extensive footage of their tour, while the newspapers generally printed flattering photos of the two on their front pages. The widespread coverage served to reinforce the public's favorable perception of high-level USG interest in tsunami relief and reconstruction. End summary.

2. (U) Sri Lankan print media uniformly praised the visit of the former Presidents in the English as well as Sinhala and Tamil newspapers. During their visit to Sri Lanka, the two former Presidents met with President Kumaratunga on Feb. 20, then visited USAID -sponsored assistance sites in Matara and Galle Districts in the south, including a water pump project, temporary shelter, and psychological and social counseling for tsunami-affected children. All papers used front-page, full-color photos of Clinton and Bush in their coverage, featuring scenes of the two meeting with Sri Lankan officials and at USAID-sponsored relief sites. Articles were uniformly accompanied with photos of Clinton and Bush interacting with children at USAID project sites, and served to highlight the childrens' plight and point up American concern for their long-term recovery. Government owned Sinhala daily Dinamina February 22 led with "Aid used effectively: former U.S. presidents express satisfaction." Independent English Daily Mirror February 22 headlined: "Work with LTTE, U.S. tells govt." Independent Tamil daily Thinakkural of February 21 led with: "If you want to help Sri Lanka, come and see the situation yourselves - Bush and Clinton inform the international community." Independent Tamil-language daily Virakesari bannered February 21: "Warm welcome to Bush and Clinton - will visit the affected areas in the south today," and accompanied the article with a front-page photo of the two greeting President Kumaratunga. The only negative reportage came from Virakesari, on February 22, which headlined: "We are worried that Clinton and Bush won't tour North East - TNA" in which Tamil National Alliance MP Adaikkalanathan noted that Tamils were worried that the former Presidents did not visit the North and the East.

3. (U) Editorial comment was largely positive, with government-owned Daily News noting on February 22: "Highest point in U.S. - Lanka relations": "...The Americans have shown that they are warm and caring. The world's biggest superpower has come running to our aid along with several other nations, such as our immediate neighbours. The Americans with their own hands cleared the rubble, built new homes and gave us a spirit of optimism getting us out of the paralytic depression caused by the tsunami." The Daily News also mentioned USAID favorably

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several times during the course of the article. Under the header "Welcome, Presidents Bush and Clinton," the state-run Sunday Observer of February 20 commented: "...The United States was one of the first countries to respond with relief - men and material. U.S. volunteers were particularly effective in swift clearing of debris and in providing temporary shelters to many victims... A word of thanks must also go to hundreds and thousands of US citizens who volunteered to collect and send relief items from the moment they heard of the tragedy... We have no doubt the visit of the two former US Presidents would give a new impetus to the relief and rehabilitation effort and galvanise the private sector in the US for speedier assistance in the reconstruction phase that has already begun..."

4. (U) Taking a slightly more introspective tone, the independent English daily Island commented in its February 22 editorial: "Welcome the Yanks but..."
"All Sri Lankans very warmly welcomed the two former American Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton who were here in our hour of need. The two presidents saw for

themselves the ravages caused by the biggest ever natural disaster in recent history... The United States has been a true friend of this country and has stood by us during the last 20 years during which this country that was known as a paradise turned into the 'killing fields of South Asia'. Sri Lanka on its part has continued to back US foreign policy such as in its battle against global terrorism. The visit by the two former presidents should be used to further strengthen US- Sri Lankan ties."

15. (U) Electronic media also played up the tour, with television stations offering generous coverage of all portions of the visit. State-run broadcaster Rupavahini, in addition to making the February 20 arrival their top story on their afternoon and evening news broadcasts, ran nearly seven minutes of the two-ex-Presidents' Feb. 21 visit to an aid site in the southern district of Matara, repeating the segment several times throughout the day. Independent Maharaja Television Network and Swarnavahini also broadcast widespread, positive coverage throughout the weekend in all three languages. In addition, pro-Tiger website TamilNet noted on Feb 22: "Clinton expresses hope on joint mechanism for Tsunami reconstruction," and covered the visit without editorializing or comment.

16. (U) The only (slightly) dissenting note in the largely positive coverage came from independent Tamil daily Thinakkural in its February 22 op-ed, in which it said: "Former U.S. Presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush (Snr.) arrived in Sri Lanka to tour the tsunami affected areas but did not visit the North and the East that were mostly affected... We are unsure who was responsible for this historical mistake, whether the Sri Lankan government or the U.S. embassy in Colombo... America has not come of age pertaining to diplomacy and that was evident when they had one of the summits of the donor countries in America without inviting the LTTE... Their failure to visit the north and east cannot be reasoned out."

17. (U) Comment: Local media coverage of the visit by former Presidents Bush and Clinton to Sri Lanka showcased the attention of the USG towards tsunami-affected countries, and was positively received by the Sri Lankan public. The few dissenting voices from the Tamil media noting that the North and East seemed to have been neglected have been present since the tsunami struck, and paled next to the broadly positive attention the visit received. The two ex-Presidents were a hit here, and our favorable ratings in public opinion were undoubtedly reinforced. End Comment.

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